# Detail Rome's persecution of Christians during second century until the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E.

I now have comprehensive information about Roman persecution of Christians from the second century through the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. Let me compile this into a detailed scholarly response.

## Rome's Persecution of Christians: From the Second Century to the Edict of Milan (313 CE)

The persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire evolved from sporadic, localized outbreaks in the second century to empire-wide systematic campaigns in the third century before ending with the Edict of Milan in 313. This trajectory reflects Christianity's growing presence as well as Rome's escalating attempts to suppress what it viewed as a politically subversive and religiously atheistic movement.

### Second Century: Sporadic and Local Persecution

During the second century, persecution was largely sporadic, local, and dependent on the actions of individual governors rather than centralized imperial policy. The correspondence between Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia-Pontus, and Emperor Trajan around 110-112 CE provides crucial insight into this period. Pliny wrote seeking guidance on handling Christians, noting he had never participated in trials of Christians and was uncertain about proper procedures.[1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6]

Pliny's letter reveals that Christians were executed simply for being Christian, though the specifics of their crime were never clearly articulated beyond their "stubborn refusal" to worship Roman gods. Trajan's response established an important precedent: Christians should not be actively sought out, but if denounced and proven guilty through their refusal to sacrifice to the gods, they should be punished. Those who denied Christianity and demonstrated their apostasy by worshiping Roman gods could be pardoned.[3] [4] [7]

**Hadrian's Rescript** (circa 122-124 CE) attempted to regulate Christian persecution by condemning mob violence and requiring that accusers prove Christians guilty of illegal acts before condemnation. This provided Christians some protection, as false accusations could rebound on the accuser. However, Christianity remained technically illegal, and persecution continued at local levels.[8] [9]

**Antoninus Pius** (138-161 CE) maintained Trajan's procedures and showed relative tolerance, though he did not grant Christianity legal status. The period saw comparative peace for Christians, though sporadic persecutions continued.[10] [11] [12]

The reign of **Marcus Aurelius** (161-180 CE) witnessed some of the most violent persecutions of the second century, though modern scholarship debates the emperor's direct involvement. The most infamous incident occurred at **Lyon (Lugdunum) in 177**, where Christians faced brutal torture and execution in the amphitheater. The martyrs included Bishop Pothinus, who died from beatings; Sanctus, a deacon tormented with red-hot irons; and Blandina, a slave woman whose extraordinary endurance under torture became legendary. The persecution was preceded by social exclusion, mob violence, and false accusations of cannibalism and incest—misunderstandings of Christian practices.[13] [14] [15] [16] [17] [18]

Around 155-156 CE (or possibly 166-167 CE), **Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna**, was martyred at age 86. When urged to deny Christ and swear by Caesar, he responded: "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?". His martyrdom account became one of the earliest Christian martyrologies outside the New Testament.[19] [20] [21] [22]

## Reasons for Persecution

Roman persecution stemmed from several interconnected factors. Christians were accused of **atheism** because they refused to acknowledge the Roman gods and rejected the imperial cult—the worship of deified emperors that served as a loyalty oath to the state. This refusal was interpreted as political disloyalty and treason (*maiestas*). Romans believed that maintaining proper sacrifices to the gods ensured military success and prosperity; Christian refusal to participate threatened this cosmic order.[23] [24] [25] [26] [27] [3]

Christians were also viewed as practicing "national apostasy" by abandoning ancestral customs (*mos maiorum*) and embracing what Romans considered a "mischievous superstition" characterized by "hatred of mankind". Rumors circulated that Christians practiced cannibalism (a misunderstanding of the Eucharist) and incest (from references to "brothers and sisters"). Their secretive meetings and withdrawal from normal social life fueled suspicion.[6] [24] [28] [27] [23]

## Third Century: Intensification and Empire-Wide Campaigns

The third century marked a dramatic shift toward more systematic persecution. In **202 CE, Septimius Severus** issued an edict forbidding conversions to Christianity and Judaism. This persecution particularly affected North Africa, where **Perpetua and Felicity** were martyred at Carthage on March 7, 203. Perpetua, a young noblewoman with an infant son, and Felicity, her pregnant slave, along with their companions, were imprisoned, then executed by wild beasts and sword in the amphitheater. Perpetua's prison diary, preserved by early Christians, provides one of the most affecting martyrdom accounts from antiquity.[29] [30] [31] [32] [33] [34] [35]

**Maximinus Thrax** (235-238 CE) reversed his predecessor's policy of tolerance and ordered church leaders executed. Pope Pontian and the antipope Hippolytus were exiled to the mines of Sardinia, where both died—Pontian becoming the first pope to abdicate his office. However, this persecution appears to have been more localized than empire-wide.[36] [37] [38]

The **Decian persecution** (249-251 CE) represented the first systematic, empire-wide attempt to suppress Christianity. Emperor Decius issued an edict requiring all inhabitants of the empire

(except Jews) to sacrifice to the Roman gods and obtain a certificate (*libellus*) signed by commissioners confirming their sacrifice. Over forty such certificates survive from Egypt, providing contemporary evidence of this persecution. Christians faced a stark choice: sacrifice and apostatize, or face execution. The persecution caused thousands of martyrdoms and created internal church conflicts over how to treat those who had lapsed (*lapsi*) by sacrificing or obtaining certificates through bribery.[39] [40] [41] [42] [43]

**Valerian** (253-260 CE) initially tolerated Christians but abruptly changed course in 257. His first edict commanded Christian clergy to sacrifice to Roman gods or face banishment. The second edict in 258 was more severe: bishops, priests, and deacons were to be executed immediately; Christian senators and equestrians faced loss of property and execution if they refused to sacrifice; Christian matrons faced property confiscation and banishment; and imperial household members who were Christian were reduced to slavery. Pope Sixtus II was executed on August 6, 258, while celebrating the Eucharist in the catacombs; Cyprian of Carthage was martyred on September 14, 258. The persecution ended abruptly when Valerian was captured by the Persians in 260.[44] [45] [46] [1]

The **Great Persecution** under **Diocletian** (303-311 CE) was the final and most severe wave of persecution. Beginning February 23, 303, Diocletian issued four successive edicts of escalating severity. The first ordered destruction of churches, burning of scriptures, confiscation of church property, and loss of legal rights for Christians who refused to recant. The second ordered imprisonment of all clergy. The third mandated torture of imprisoned clergy until they sacrificed. The fourth edict extended the sacrifice requirement to all citizens throughout the empire. Christians who refused faced torture and execution. Despite its severity, the Great Persecution failed to eradicate Christianity; instead, it may have strengthened Christian resolve.[47] [48] [49] [50] [51] [52] [53] [1]

## The Path to Toleration

The persecution officially ended in stages. On April 30, 311, the dying Emperor **Galerius** issued the **Edict of Serdica** (also called the Edict of Toleration), effectively ending persecution in the Eastern Empire. Though the edict criticized Christians for abandoning ancestral customs, it granted them the right to practice their faith and rebuild places of worship, provided they maintained public order. This was the first time Christianity received the implicit status of *religio licita* (a recognized religion) in the Roman Empire.[52] [54] [53]

Constantine, who had ended persecution in territories under his control upon becoming emperor in 306, defeated his rival Maxentius at the **Battle of the Milvian Bridge** on October 28, 312. Notably, Maxentius had actually stopped persecuting Christians despite later pro-Constantinian sources portraying him as a tyrant.[55] [56] [57] [58] [59]

In February 313, Constantine and his co-emperor Licinius met in Milan for Licinius's wedding to Constantine's half-sister Constantia. There they issued the **Edict of Milan**, which granted full religious freedom to Christians and all others to worship as they chose. The edict went beyond mere toleration, mandating the return of all confiscated Christian property and granting the church legal rights to organize. While the edict is often credited with "making Christianity legal," it more accurately established comprehensive religious tolerance throughout the empire, allowing Christianity to flourish openly for the first time.[60] [61] [62] [63] [64]

### Christian Population Growth

Despite persecution, Christianity experienced steady growth. Scholars estimate approximately 1,000-1,500 Christians by 60 CE, 7,000-10,000 by 100 CE, and 30,000-40,000 by 150 CE. By 200 CE, estimates suggest 140,000-170,000 Christians, growing to 2.5-3.5 million by 300 CE—representing roughly 10% of the empire's 60 million inhabitants. This growth rate, if sustained, would have resulted in 25-35 million Christians (approximately half the empire's population) by 400 CE.[65] [66] [67] [68]

The transformation of Christianity from persecuted sect to dominant religion represents one of history's most remarkable religious and social shifts. What began with sporadic local persecutions in the second century culminated in empire-wide systematic attempts at eradication in the third century, only to end with official toleration and eventually imperial patronage by 313 CE. The endurance of Christian communities through these trials, their willingness to face martyrdom rather than renounce their faith, and their continued growth despite persecution all contributed to Christianity's ultimate triumph in the Roman world.

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